

Post of the Month

# Kuwait

Bridging the gulf between tradition and ambition

By Leyth Swidan

Piercing through the clouds, the iconic Kuwait Towers could be overlooked as a purely decorative element in the city's skyline, but they serve an important and practical purpose as one of the country's six water reservoirs. At the time of construction in the 1970s, the Amir envisioned an attractive design for the sixth location of Kuwait's water towers. With picturesque views and a modern design incorporating Islamic patterns, the Towers are popular among tourists and locals

alike. Inside, 600 feet in the sky, a rotating viewing sphere provides a panoramic view of the city. Looking to the east, the waters of the Persian Gulf extend far beyond the horizon. To the south stretches a seemingly endless coast. And to the west lies the constantly evolving skyline of downtown Kuwait, with the world's tallest carved concrete skyscraper in full view along with the iconic Liberation Tower. The Kuwait Towers, once known only as beautiful reservoirs, withstood the trials of the Gulf War and the country's reconstruction. Today, the Towers are a symbol of modern Kuwait.



Skyscrapers peak high into the sky on a cloudy day in Kuwait City. Photo by Ibrahim Muhamed

Situated in the northern Persian Gulf, Kuwait has weathered treacherous times in order to achieve peace and stability. In August 1990, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Kuwait. Many Kuwaitis were forced to flee to neighboring countries as Iraqi troops looted homes and businesses. After six months of Iraqi occupation, Operation Desert Storm liberated Kuwait in February 1991. The invasion, resistance and suppression—and subsequent liberation—transformed Kuwaiti attitudes in ways that persist to this date. While the country has rebuilt, the legacy of former President George H. W. Bush lives on. In 2016, the late president's portrait was on display at a Kuwaiti wedding. The groom, Bush al-Widhan, was born in the aftermath of the war and named in his honor. Upon Bush's death in November 2018, the Kuwait Towers lit up with images of him to honor his leadership role in Kuwait's liberation and Kuwaitis lined up to come to the embassy and express their condolences.



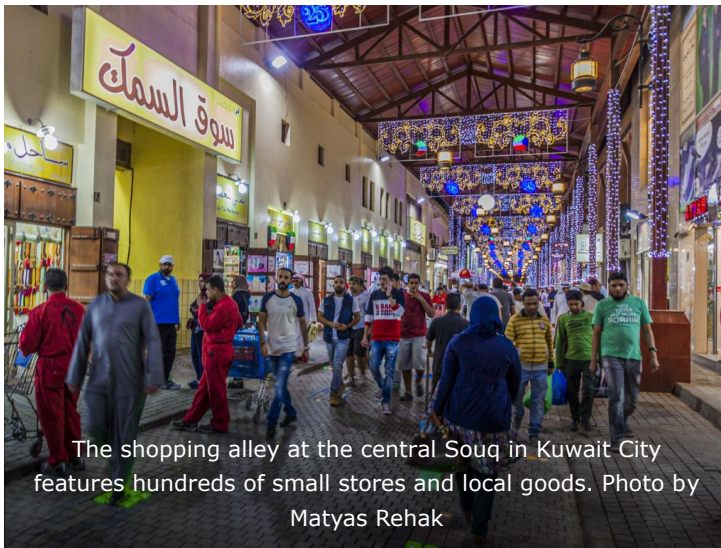
Camel races are a popular wintertime spectator sport for locals and expats alike who drive alongside camels with electric jockeys as they race at speeds up to 60kph. Photo by Yasser Al-Zayyat

Taking advantage of Kuwait's strategic location, fans of the outdoors can easily rent Jet Skis along the shoreline, while an hourlong drive leads to Khiran Resort, a popular Kuwaiti getaway for sailing enthusiasts and sea lovers. For those seeking excursions from the city via the water, speed boat rides to Kuwait's many islands are a convenient option. Failaka Island offers a welcome diversion from the liveliness of Kuwait City and houses some of the most significant Mesopotamian-era archaeological sites in the Gulf.



For those who enjoy the sporting life, residents highly recommend the Camel Racing Club. On Saturdays, adventure-seekers can drive alongside camels with robot jockeys as they race in the sand at 60 kph.

The mix of Kuwait's old and new provides many shopping opportunities at both local, traditional markets and larger shopping centers. A commercial hub before the discovery of oil, Kuwait's Souq Mubarakiya has retained its identity as a bustling center of trade. Strolling down its walkways, visitors are greeted by the unique scents and colors of the traditional market, with hundreds of small stores displaying richly colored spices and the air infused with incense and oud perfumes. Here, local shoppers can be heard haggling over everything from dates to cologne to fish to gold. This is an ideal place to be immersed in the vibrant daily life of the Kuwaiti people.

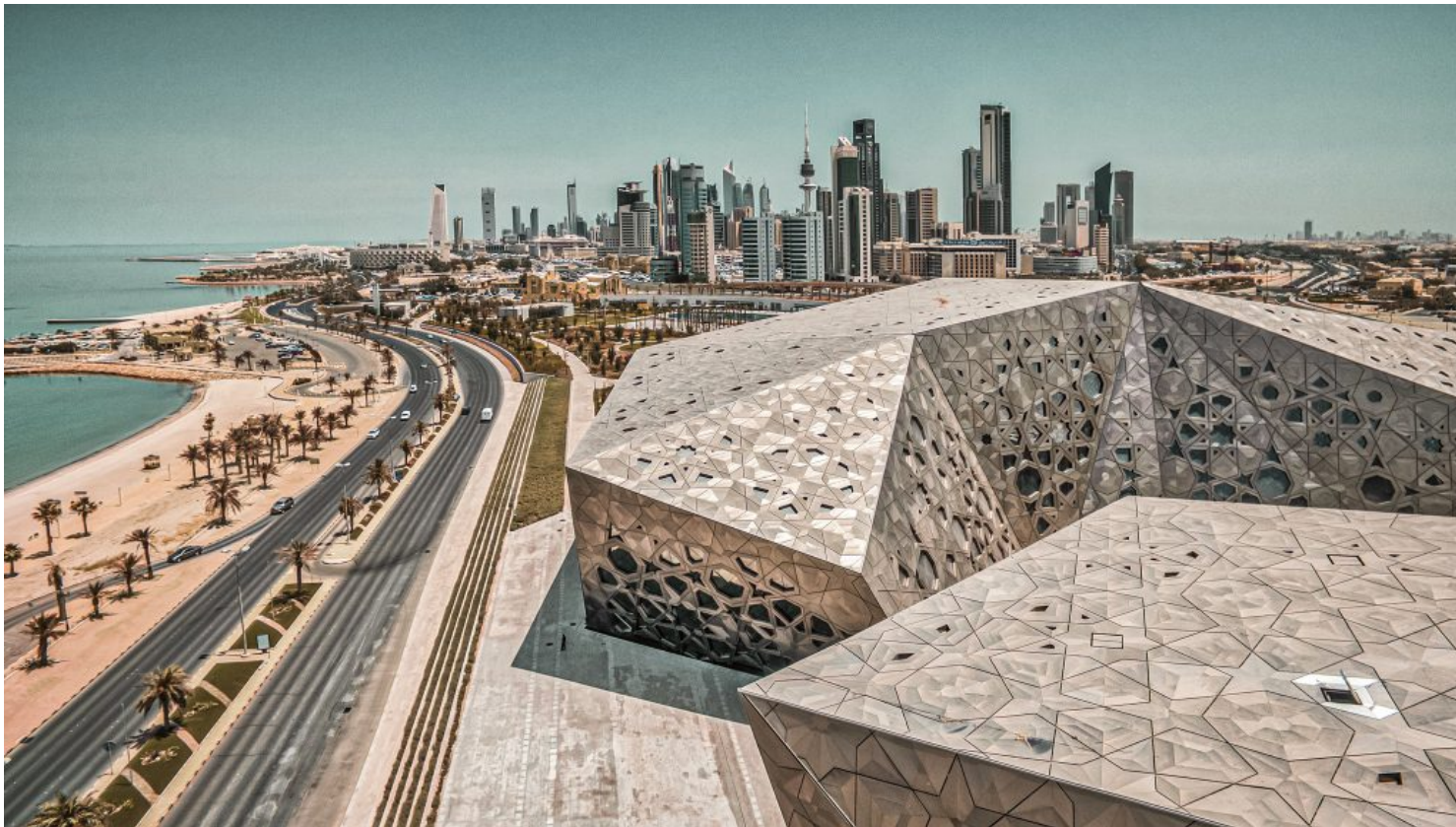




The interior of the Avenues in Kuwait, Dec. 2014. Photo by Philippe Lange

The Avenues, the largest mall in Kuwait and second-largest in the Middle East, is located a short drive away from Souq Mubarakia. Inside the mall the pathways are lined with palm trees and further designed to emulate European streets, a traditional Kuwaiti souk, a luxury mall and New York's SoHo neighborhood, with dozens of Arabic, Persian, American and international dining options. With 17 Starbucks under a single roof, there is no shortage of options for a caffeine fix.





This beautiful coastline of Kuwait City also shows the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre. Photo by ADionisio

Inaugurated in 2016, the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Cultural Centre functions as the city's top entertainment destination, housing the country's first large-scale concert hall. The state-of-the-art building embodies Kuwait's identity and has hosted diverse performances from Arabic and classical music to the Broadway show "Cats." The venue along with the Sheikh Abdullah Al-Salem Cultural Centre, a museum complex featuring art exhibits and museums, have redefined the cultural scene in Kuwait. Spanning more than 200,000 square meters, Al Shaheed Park is an oasis in the heart of Kuwait City. As Kuwait's largest park, it portrays the country's land, history and culture through its

walkways, museums, exhibition areas and an outdoor theater. At night, the park offers fountain light shows and a full view of downtown Kuwait lit up.



Ambassador Lawrence R. Silverman cycles with friends over the newly constructed Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, June 2019. Photo courtesy of Embassy Kuwait

Kuwait's newest icon is the Sheikh Jaber Al-Ahmad Al-Sabah Causeway, which connects the country's capital to the future Silk City that is set to become a major free trade hub. Designed with help from the American Association of State Highways and the U.S. Department of Transportation,



it resembles a long sleek sailboat on the Bay of Kuwait. At 30-miles long, it is one of the longest bridges in the world.



Embassy employees regularly attend social gatherings called diwanias throughout Ramadan. They join Kuwaiti contacts in breaking their fasts at sunset and eat the Kuwait national dish, machboos, a spiced chicken and rice



dish. Photo courtesy of Embassy Kuwait

Embassy personnel take full advantage of Kuwait's unique *diwaniyas*, which are rooted in the local hospitality culture. These gatherings allow people to congregate in Kuwaiti homes most evenings to discuss everything from cars to current events. Visiting diwaniyas was historically an integral part of a Kuwaiti man's social life. Diwaniyas in Kuwait have preserved their importance in social, political and economic lives, as they have been passed from generation to generation and bind Kuwaitis of different sects and backgrounds. Some diwaniyas receive guests daily, others receive guests for only a few days per week and others receive guests only on special occasions. For Embassy Kuwait, visiting diwaniyas is central to its outreach, whether it is to wish Kuwaitis a blessed Ramadan or to maintain strong relationships with important contacts. During Ramadan 2019, embassy staff from all sections visited 293 diwaniyas.

Kuwait stands out from the other Gulf states for having a relatively open political system. The country boasts an elected and vocal parliament, social and political rights for women and press and social media freedoms that surpass those found in most other countries in the region. Although oil has transformed this Gulf nation from a small but prosperous trading port into an oil-exporting powerhouse, Kuwait recognizes the need to diversify its economy. The government's ambitious Vision 2035 plan targets Kuwait's transformation into a financial, commercial and cultural hub over the next 15 years.

Kuwait continues to be among the United States' closest and most important partners in the Middle East. The political and defense relationship is underpinned by America's role in liberating Kuwait three decades ago, and the United States military continues to enjoy unique strategic access in Kuwait to maintain stability and security in the region. Since October 2016, the embassy has

used annual high-level ministerial Strategic Dialogue to achieve tangible results for American interests, reaching new agreements on education, culture, defense cooperation, trade and border protection. The Mission is focused on ensuring that Kuwait remains a strong and stable partner, particularly as a new generation of youth grow up without memories of Kuwait's liberation. To keep this memory alive and honor those who served in support of Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the National Desert Storm and Desert Shield Memorial has been approved for construction in Washington's National Mall in 2021.





The Public Affairs Section invited former U.S. women's national team player Sarah Huffman and professional women's coach Lisa Berg to Kuwait, May 2018. They held soccer training sessions for girls, for many of whom this was their first time practicing kicking and heading a soccer ball. They also spent time training local players and coaches. Photo courtesy of Embassy Kuwait

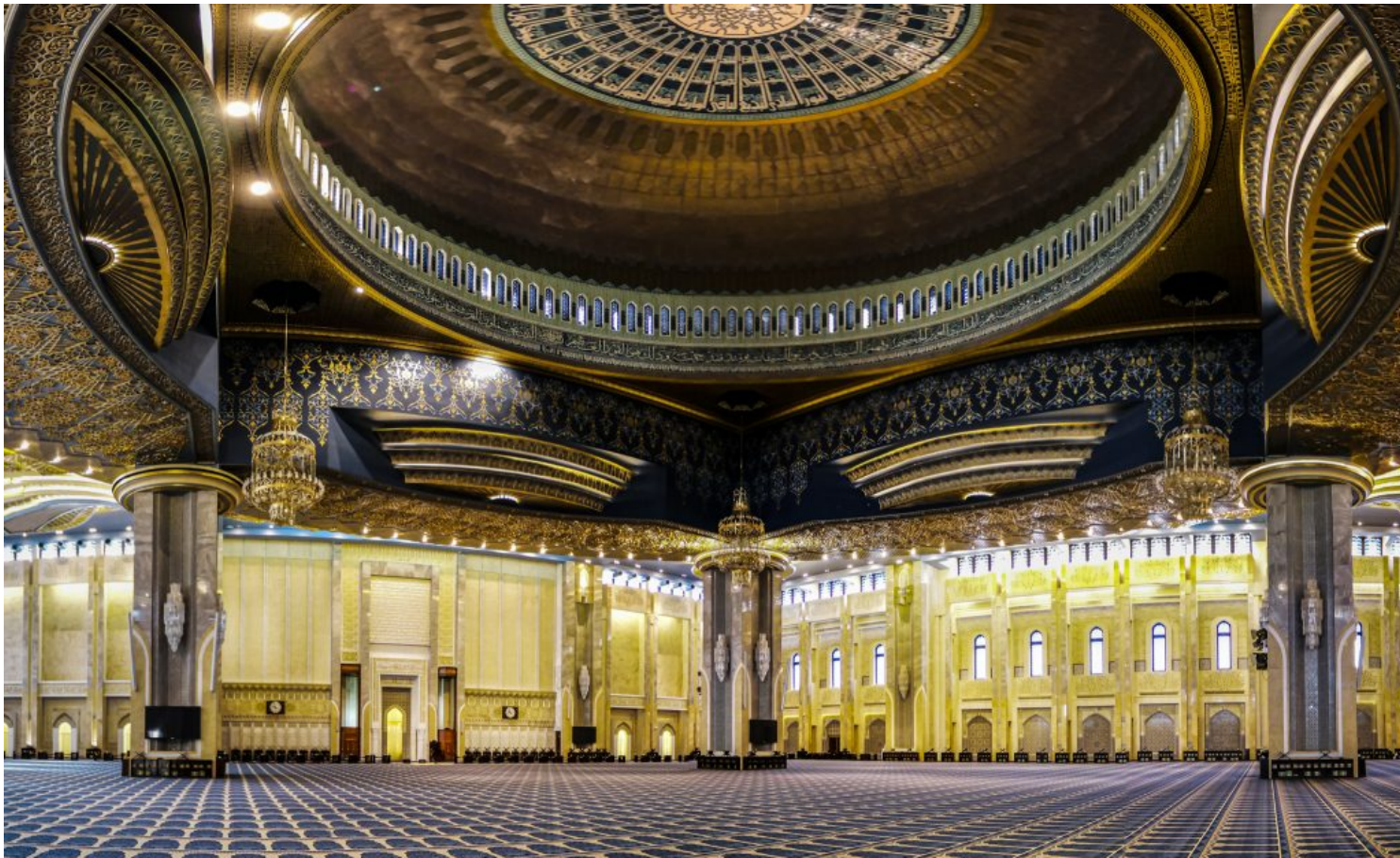
Kuwait's current Amir served as foreign minister for 40 years, a detail that helps to explain why such a small country plays such an outsized diplomatic role. Kuwait works to bridge the differences

between the Gulf countries, has hosted peace talks between the parties to the Yemen conflict and has worked closely with the United States as a member of the U.N. Security Council since 2018.

Kuwait is also known globally for its generosity toward humanitarian initiatives. It has contributed more than \$1 billion for humanitarian assistance to Yemen. Kuwait chaired or co-chaired the last five pledging conferences for Syria, and it has committed \$1.7 billion of its own resources to the cause. In February 2018, Kuwait hosted a reconstruction conference for Iraq that netted more than \$30 billion in pledges from participants, including \$1 billion in grants and concessionary loans from the government of Kuwait. Before any of these recent efforts, the U.N. had already recognized the Amir with the title of Global Humanitarian Leader in 2014.

Maintaining depth and longevity in the U.S.-Kuwait relationship is at the heart of Embassy Kuwait's daily work across all sections, in particular through promoting U.S. higher education. In 2018, 12,300 Kuwaiti students studied at American colleges and universities, contributing an estimated \$1.2 billion to the U.S. economy. The large number of Kuwaitis who study in the United States shapes the economic, cultural and political perspectives of the country's next generation of leaders and policymakers. Through education fairs and alumni networks in Kuwait, the embassy strives to maintain these people-to-people connections that will form the foundation of the U.S.-Kuwait relationship well into the future.





An interior view of the Kuwait Grand Mosque. Photo by Homo Cosmicos

The embassy's public affairs outreach also involves showcasing the arts and increasing the Kuwaiti public's contact with a variety of American performing artists. In the past year, the embassy has brought a diverse array of cultural programming to Kuwait. These have included hosting soccer coaches, a jazz-inspired painter, a U.S. Air Force band, a country music band and an American oud player.



An aerial view of Kuwait City at night. Photo by Ibrahim Muhamed

Kuwait has managed to retain its storied culture and continues to serve as an oasis of peace in a turbulent region. Here, modern city comforts blend seamlessly with local traditions that harken to the country's merchant, Bedouin and pearl-diving roots. The U.S. Embassy in Kuwait continues to build on the strong foundation of a shared desire for regional peace and stability and looks forward to advancing the United States and Kuwait's relationship in the areas of security, economic prosperity and people-to-people exchanges.





Names and boundaries are not necessarily authoritative